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PLACEMENT CENTERS FOR HANDICAPPED

WORKERS



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PLACEMENT CENTERS FOR HANDICAPPED WORKERS

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I. The American Labor Market

AMERICAN workers constitute the human content of our American labor market. Various estimates indicate these workers number close to 50,000,000 out of our total population of 122,000,000. Amidst these workers and their families since the early autumn of 1929, the present unemployment crisis has worked its wrack and ruin. In these 20 months of depression at least 10,000,000 of these workers have tasted the bitterness and social injustice of unemployment. Not all have been without work at any one time and few all of the period in question, but all of these ten million have felt the haunting fears, and millions the dreaded deprivations of unemployment.

Amidst this experience the American people are slowly achieving a new appreciation of the relation of the American labor market to the welfare of the American nation.

Mixed up in this process of changing public opinion one finds much wishful thinking and much thinking of a propaganda type. But more central in the process is a determined drive to get at the essential facts of the American labor market and deal with these pertinent facts on their merits, seeking to avoid on the one hand wishful thinking and on the other propaganda. This discussion of handicapped workers aims to present briefly the essential facts of their numbers and their present life-situations, and of ways of aiding them as a part of the American labor market.

It is important to bear in mind the fact that these handicapped workers are a part of the human material in the American labor market. They, too, are deeply involved in the acute problems of unemployment. Indeed, the wise approach to the main solutions of unemployment may be in the direction of seeking to relieve the distress of special types of unemployed workers. By such compassable

an inspection force to correct many conditions which are the primary or basic cause of industrial injuries. To illustrate one condition, there is not ample power to require the spacing of machines, tools, raw or finished products. Overcrowded conditions are responsible for injuries in all four of the groups named above, but there is no limit to what the plant owner or manager can do to promote safety and sanitation, and thus improve working conditions.

I am not advocating that inspectors be given more power, but we must realize that some employers do not know all they should about safe methods of working. Others will not do things to improve working conditions until compelled to do so, but this is not true of the large majority who are willing to do things which are required by law—but this is not enough. What is happening in industry is an indictment of industrial management as a whole. Particularly is this so in the industries which have avoidable injuries. Personally, I would prefer to have industry teach the proper methods of performing the work of the particular industry. This is important. For after all is said and done, the people conducting the industries should know the tech-

nique of the work of their industry better than anyone else, and are, therefore, the proper people to assume the task. It is their responsibility if unnecessary injuries occur, and then they are remiss in their duty to humanity.

The record of industrial injuries challenges their ability to properly conduct industry. The question arises, "Will they do the job or must the state make them do it?" As good business men they should change the records, for we all concede that present industrial injuries cost too much money—to say nothing of the suffering and misery they cause.

One of the first things we should insist upon is that a better method of reporting industrial injuries be instituted, so that we will at least learn the real cause of the injuries. This will enable industry to learn just what are the causes responsible for industrial injuries. With this knowledge we shall be in a better position to apply the remedial measure to reduce them in those groups of injuries which furnish a fertile field for success.

Address, 18th Annual Convention of the Association of Government Officials in Industry of the United States and Canada, at Boston, Mass., May 21st, 1931.

studies and plans the industrial order may soon reach an understanding of and ability to deal successfully with the major issues. Handicapped workers are in the main marginal workers in the labor market. By solving the problem of providing employment for these marginal workers we shall be slowly whittling away at the more central problem of providing employment for all displaced workers.

II. The Numbers of Handicapped Workers

One searches almost in vain for authentic information as to the numbers of handicapped workers in the United States. Clues to the actual facts in the situation are provided by combining figures given by the U. S. Census Bureau and the National Safety Council. During the 10 years 1920 to 1929, a total of 865,326 persons were killed in fatal accidents in the United States—an average of 86,532 per year for the ten years. The highest number in any of these ten years for which records have been completed came in 1929 when 97,000 people were killed in fatal accidents. But these persons are no longer in the picture. The National Safety Council estimates that for each fatality in 1929 100 other persons were injured. What proportion of these were permanent disabilities, resulting in industrial handicaps, no one knows. But if one guesses that one in 10 is impaired, the astounding figure of 1,000,000 persons with industrial handicaps, as a result of accidents in this one year, is reached.

But some handicaps develop con-

genitally or are the results of diseases, such as heart disease or tuberculosis. One cannot ignore the figures developed by those cooperating with President Hoover's Child Welfare Conference last November. They estimated that among the present child crop of 45,000,000 in these United States 1,000,000 children present impaired hearts, 382,000 are tuberculous, 342,000 have impaired hearing, 18,000 are totally deaf, 50,000 are partially blind, 14,000 totally blind, and 300,000 crippled in some form or other, and 450,000 are mentally retarded. Medical science and adequate social treatment can do much for these handicapped children. But even at the best it is apparent we must plan to absorb many hundreds of thousands of these 2,500,000 or more handicapped children into our industrial system as workers presenting one or more distinct industrial disabilities, or carry the social costs of their maintenance by philanthropy or taxation.

If to these two glimpses into the rate at which handicapped workers are being produced, one adds a recent estimate of the number of handicapped workers now facing the problems of adjustment in our highly competitive industrial system, something of the large proportions of the problem of handicapped workers begins to dawn upon one. In May, 1927, (page 2) the statistical bulletin of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company presented some figures on the handicapped workers in the United States at that time. "At a conservative estimate, there are well over a million persons in the

United States seriously handicapped or wholly incapacitated as wage earners by various physical or mental impairments." Among these the Bulletin lists 75,000 blind, 45,000 deaf mutes and "about 700,000 . . . crippled to an extent interfering more or less seriously with their earning capacity."

Three aspects of this brief treatment of the numbers of handicapped workers deserve further attention. *First*, studies of child life make it clear that for years to come large numbers of handicapped children will be coming to mature years and seeking entrance into our business and industrial operations. *Second*, during the ten years from 1920 to 1929, large numbers of handicapped persons were turned out from the accidents incident to our contemporary civilization. There is no immediate prospect that these accidents or their results upon human beings will be greatly ameliorated in the near future. Our social order must then face the task of absorbing these handicapped persons. But how?

Third, there is already present in our social order a very large number of handicapped workers. Not one knows how many. We may take the figure of 1,000,000 as a minimum. My own guess is that there are many more. Two attempts to meet the problems of handicapped workers have developed some information that throws added light on the present numbers.

Under a special grant from the Russell Sage Foundation the placement center for handicapped workers has operated in New York City

for nearly five years. The records indicate that thousands of workers with some form of industrial disability were registered in the first three years of operation.

The Central Placement Bureau for Handicapped Workers was opened in Chicago about January, 1930. In the nearly one year and a half of operation about 1500 handicapped workers have been registered.

Both these pioneer explorations of the social areas involved indicate a heavy incidence of workers with industrial disabilities in both these metropolitan regions.

These workers with industrial handicaps are with us, now. Their life-situations call loudly for wise social treatment. So both for the present and the future, it behooves us as social workers to give further thought to the plight of handicapped workers and what may be done to aid them.

III. The Life-Situations of Handicapped Workers

American life is being tested in these days of vast unemployment. American ideals of democracy are under fire. Our Declaration of Independence and Constitution proclaim the right of everyone to be the pursuit of happiness. But our fast pace and vast industrial system are releasing amongst us injured and handicapped people to the number of many scores of thousands each year. And guided by certain misused Rubrics of efficiency and safety this same ruthless industrial and business system refuses in the main to give these

same handicapped workers adequate chances to earn the wherewithal to sustain life and maintain happiness. It behooves us then to re-examine the bases of independence and happiness in the light of these new conditions in the life-situations of handicapped persons. In these backgrounds we may discover some of the essential reasons for the creation and development of placement centers for handicapped workers. I want briefly to suggest three aspects of these relations of the worker to his job and the industrial and social order, as a sort of solid background upon which to discuss the organization, techniques and policies of placement centers for handicapped workers.

First, under current conditions of life in America, work is essential to mental balance and continued sanity. Those familiar with unemployment and its results on personality and character, need no argument here. Upon others, those of us who know, must press these facts with persistence, until the invasions of unemployment and idleness upon personality and character are reduced to a minimum. Of what avail is independence and liberty of action, if the industrial order denies the very means to maintain mental balance and sanity? These aspects of unemployment challenge the best in all of us for they imperil the very foundations of social order in personal life and experience. In the colonial and frontier days our forefathers, if they found no work at one point, could move out into the unclaimed frontier and maintain mental balance and sanity in wresting a living from

the unhewed forests or the fruitful prairies. But no such open vistas await the unemployed worker today. Indeed, he may follow certain chimeras like the auto-manufacturing centers on Boulder Dam only to find thousands of other idle workmen there when he arrives on the spot in his rusty old Henry. And so our workman moves in a vain hunt from factory to factory, plant to plant, or city to city, or city to country, or country to city, only to find the ever endless sign, "No workmen needed." In the meantime his savings disappear, his family becomes more shabby and needy, his own courage ebbs away in the face of this apparently vast and heartless industrial system that no longer has room for him. Mental balance and sanity are impaired, despair settles down on him. He may resort to relief agencies and submit to relief measures, always pitiful and inadequate in face of the needs of himself and his family. At times the burden becomes too heavy, his mind gives way under the strain. He may resort to crime, or he may be sent to an institution for the mentally deranged; or neighbors and the police will find the gas turned on, and the family immolated on the altar of our insatiate industrial system. But whatever the denouement, it is certain that this psychological aspect of our American independence must be understood more fully. What avails the *right* to the pursuit of happiness if the opportunity to work and so maintain mental balance and sanity is denied the workers? Let us make sure in our own thinking and convictions that these essential conditions

of mental balance and sanity belong also, and perhaps in special measure, to those whose bodies already bear the scars of accident, disease or congenital deformity and whose personalities are marred with the still deeper scars left by the thoughtless social treatment accorded to many who carry the burden of such physical limitations. If any need the interviewing services of wise social counselors and agencies, let us remember that these scarred handicapped workers do.

Second, work is essential to personal and family maintenance. This is basic to American life. Any factor such as unemployment that impairs this aspect of independence attacks the very foundations of our American industrial order. It tends to destroy that sense of independence and feeling of personal responsibility that has been so characteristic of American culture.

Third, work is essential to social justice. The most persistent and pervasive effect of unemployment is registered in this area. It reaches millions who may not feel the pinch of actual hunger, but who feel and resent deeply the denials of social justice they meet in the course of unemployment. The prevalence of these attitudes is known to all who are familiar with the experience of handicapped workers. Here, then, is a political aspect of the unemployment problem that calls for the best in all of us. We cannot long tolerate essential injustice without breeding slumbering resentments that may sometime become material to feed the fires of revolution.

IV. Developing Placement Centers for Handicapped Workers

The American labor market may be likened to a whirling vortex. By its centrifugal action it is ever pulling in workers along the lines of their capacity, skill, strength and knowledge; with its centripetal action it is ever whirling other workers toward its outer margin and flinging them off along paths of age, accident, disease and ignorance. The drive for efficiency in American business and industry is no respecter of handicaps, so out go the victims of accident, disease, ignorance and many who have lived beyond the strength and vigor of the fourth decade of life. Here, then, is a situation national in its scope and outreach. Something more must be done to meet it than has yet had general recognition in this country. Leaders in several cities have already pioneered the way by setting up placement centers for workers with industrial handicaps. Building upon this experience I want here to propose that in every considerable city of the United States there be developed a placement center for handicapped workers. If one such center were set up in the principal city of each state and one in each additional city having a population of 100,000 or more according to the 1930 census, the total number of placement centers would reach about 105. Possibly in some large metropolitan centers one such center for the region would serve. So the total number of placement centers would not need to be raised above 100.

*V. The Relationships and Supporting
Constituencies of such Place-
ment Centers*

The peculiar functions of such placement centers require that they be set up with great care. Their filiations extend in five distinct directions:

First, they seek to serve handicapped workers. Handicapped workers are simply one section of the body of workers in America. Many have belonged and still belong to labor unions. It is the part of wisdom to enlist the understanding and sympathetic cooperation of labor unions. Such centers should aim to enlist the interest and cooperation of all organized groups of handicapped people. Some of these organizations as for instance, the leagues for the hard of hearing, are strong and well organized and with constructive social programs including the placement of their members. Much can also be done by asking the cooperation and good will of all handicapped persons in the given community and those interested in their welfare.

Second, experience has clearly shown that such a placement center, in order to best serve its clients, must establish and maintain close working relations with physicians, hospitals and allied medical agencies such as clinics and groups organized for medical service to special types such as cardiacs and the tuberculous. Most of these medical agencies have an interest in getting their patients reset in life, after the reverses due to accident or disease. So they welcome the cooperation of intelligent and

scientific placement workers and lend great strength to the work they attempt to develop in the community. It should be axiomatic that no placement center for handicapped workers would venture to operate without close affiliation with the medical resources of the given community.

Third, unemployment has so laid its clutches upon many handicapped workers that they come to placement centers in dire social distress. In the struggle to find work all resources have faded away, so that relief becomes a measure of necessity before work may be found. This entails close relations between the placement center and the relief and charitable agencies of the city. Then, too, many of the relief agencies will find handicapped workers who do not know of the placement operations. They will send in many of their clients for placement. So the relations are reciprocal. The relief agency needs the placement center and the placement center needs the help of the relief agencies in tiding along many of its clients until work may be found and the handicapped workers established on a self-maintaining basis.

Fourth, after all, the fundamental service of the placement center is to assist the handicapped worker in his adjustment to business and industry. So great care needs to be taken in setting up proper cooperative relations with leaders in this field and the organizations that represent them, such as associations of commerce and manufacturers' associations. Business leaders and corporations will have to be asked to assist in financing the operations of the

placement center. But they must also be asked to make possible the service of the placement center by opening up chances for employment for handicapped workers in their places of business and industries. This relation to business and industry is basic to the success of any placement center for handicapped workers.

Fifth, because there are such problems of fundamental social justice involved in the present life-situations of handicapped workers, both our national and many state governments have developed effective services seeking to aid handicapped workers. All local centers for their placement should seek to cooperate with these established rehabilitation services. Fortunately, this fine cooperation between national and state and local units is already receiving practical demonstration in several large cities across the nation.

In closing this section of my statement I want to make a plea for a *united front* among all who seek the welfare of handicapped workers. Here is a national problem of large proportions with little concerted organization in the field at local points. Let us see the folly of too much independent and lack of cooperative effort. Such organization as develops in any city should proceed from the Council of Social Agencies or similar group and seek to unite all the five major types of groups and agencies, mentioned in this survey of the field, in effective and unified placement service for all handicapped workers in each local city or community and its natural area.

VI. *The Functions of a Placement Center for Handicapped Workers*

It is no doubt too early in the development of this placement service for handicapped workers to attempt too hard and fast a definition of the functions of such a placement center. Yet I feel this paper would be incomplete if I did not close with at least a suggestive treatment of such functions.

Of course, the primary function is to assist the handicapped person to find remunerative employment adapted to his remaining capacity and skills and experience.

This means, on the one hand, careful scientific study of each person registered so as to get at his past experience, his present capacities and skills and to find some clue as to how best to relate them to the vast intricacies of business and industry.

In order to do the latter successfully the placement center needs to plan a concerted and vigorous interpretative campaign among prospective employers. These handicapped workers need some one to stand up for them in the present industrial system with its rigorous demand for efficiency. It is possible to adopt many of them so that they will produce as much or more than the able-bodied worker who has more distractions and possibly less power of concentration. Such interpretative processes involve, on the other hand, a function of careful social selection and discrimination based on scientific data secured from medical sources and other centers of similar skill in getting at the essential facts of phys-

ical condition, personality and character. No placement center could possibly register and seek to place in business and industry all the handicapped persons who seek registration and placement. Many are soon seen to be fitted only for institutional care; others are found to be capable only of work under the non-speeded and protected conditions of sheltered and curative work shops. Thus the placement centers tend to exercise a selective function among handicapped persons.

But, finally, this very process of selection also involves the placement center in a function of social and vocational guidance. Hundreds of workers have been completely upset by the accident or disease that has cut them off from accustomed activities in the industrial system. They need both social guidance, amidst all the intricacies and difficulties of social life in this day, and vocational guidance of the most expert and careful kind amid the involved processes of the business and industrial systems. Thus four distinct functions are appearing in the operations of the placement centers already under way. These are:

1. Social selection and discrimination on the basis of scientific data.
2. Social and vocational guidance of handicapped workers.
3. Placement in remunerative and adapted employment.
4. Interpretation of the handicapped workers and their needs to employers and the American public in general.

VII. Conclusion

And what shall we say in closing? The facts here presented indicate what few students of the question of unemployment have yet predicted—these handicapped workers are present in such numbers in our social order as to constitute a large section of the unemployed workers in the American labor market. Thus it appears that personal handicap is a considerable cause of unemployment. Cyclical, seasonal and technological unemployment are caused by factors essentially resident in the business and industrial system, but this fourth cause of unemployment that we may call, for want of a better term—constitutional unemployment—is largely resident in the person of the unemployed worker. My personal judgment is that its effects are more destructive and persistent, more difficult to overcome in some ways than other types of unemployment.

Certainly all the evidence indicates that “constitutional unemployment” will be a large and persistent factor in any labor market that lies ahead in these United States for many years to come. Viewing these realities of the life-situation of handicapped workers, I believe it is timely on this occasion to call for such a setting up of placement centers for them as is here proposed. The need for and functions of such centers are made fairly clear by the pioneering efforts in these directions. Furthermore, such ends will not be achieved by letting the situation move along of its own accord. There is need for centralized initiative and promotion on a large scale.

Hence, in closing, I venture to call upon this group of interested social workers gathered from all over America, to set in motion a scheme for creating and developing a National Council for Handicapped Workers in whatever way seems wise; and in planning a money foundation to finance this national plan

for a continued research and study and promotion of methods for solving what is now a large section of America's major social and industrial problem — namely, unemployment among handicapped workers.

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